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THIS CULMINATING UNIT OF THE 12TH-GRADE OREGON LITERATURE CURRICULUM IS BASED UPON ONE WORK, "HAMLET." THE TEACHER VERSION INCLUDES DISCUSSIONS OF (1) THE RELEVANCE OF HAMLET'S CHARACTER TO MODERN TIMES, (2) THE PROBLEMS IN THE CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE GHOST, CLAUDIUS, AND HAMLET, (3) THE PLAY'S THREE-PHASE STRUCTURE, (4) THE PLAY'S RESOLUTION, AND (5) THE "RHETORIC" OF TRAGEDY (I.E., THE MEANS BY WHICH TRAGEDY PROJECTS A SYSTEM OF VALUES). THE STUDENT VERSION CONTAINS AN INTRODUCTORY RATIONALE FOR STUDYING "HAMLET," A DISCUSSION OF THE PLAY'S STRUCTURE, AND QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT, DISCUSSION, AND WRITING. THE FINAL SECTION OF THIS UNIT POSES QUESTIONS WHICH DRAW ATTENTION TO THE COHESIVENESS OF THE PLAY AND SUGGESTS THAT THIS STUDY OF "HAMLET" BE VIEWED AS THE CLIMAX TO THE STUDY OF THE ENTIRE LITERATURE CURRICULUM. SEE ALSO ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160, ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832, TE 000 195 THROUGH TE 000 220, AND TE 000 227 THROUGH TE 000 249. (RD)

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Literature Curriculum VI
Teacher Version

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LITERATURE CURRICULUM VI

Hamlet

Teacher Version

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A NOTE ON BIAS

The critics have tugged Hamlet this way and that for so long now that it is especially hard to see this play steadily and see it whole, and it is also most unlikely that anything really fresh and original can be said about "Hamlet and His Problems." One can hope only to be interesting and thus to sharpen interest in the play.

The view set down in the following pages is probably most indebted to G. Wilson Knight's "The Embassy of Death: an Essay on Hamlet," which first appeared in 1930, and L. C. Knights' "An Approach to Hamlet," published in 1960 (available in the former's The Wheel of Fire, University Paperbacks, and the latter's Some Shakespearian Themes, etc., Peregrine Books). Separated by thirty years, they agree in viewing Hamlet somewhat more coldly than Coleridge a century and a half ago and A. C. Bradley sixty years ago. Needless to say, there is not and there never will be any final "authority" on these matters.

TEACHER VERSION

LITERATURE CURRICULUM VI

Hamlet

I. Prefatory

Hamlet has been selected for twelfth-grade study in part because we think it can be made to serve as a "unit of culmination" in this last year of the six-year curriculum. It is a time when the analytical skills developed in the course of our considerations of the subject-form-point-of-view aspects of literary works can be made to serve ends beyond the primary and important one of initial understanding. It is a time when ultimate questions about values, about taste and judgment, can be fruitfully raised. It ought also to be a time when some intelligent attention can be given to what we are calling the "rhetoric" of literature; that is, to questions about the kind of "truth" literature presents, about what it means to "believe in" a play or poem or novel; about something that may be called poetic or dramatic or fictional "persuasion," about whether the reading of good literature changes us in any important way. As usual, we want to approach all these problems not in a spirit of dogmatism but rather in an attitude of patient and perhaps skeptical inquiry.

We have not, however, selected Hamlet simply because it can be used as some sort of pedagogical climax. There are other and perhaps better reasons, many of them self-evident. One, however, is worth noting here and worth emphasizing in the classroom. It is possible that, even more than Julius Caesar and Macbeth and The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet speaks to us, to modern man in this profoundly troubling modern world. The world of Hamlet is of course Shakespearian and it is of course Elizabethan; but--in part because the Renaissance was itself "modern" and our world was inherent in it--it is also twentieth-century, offering clear proof of the continuity of history, of human experience.

II. How Hamlet Speaks to Us

"I do not know, my lord, what I should think."

It is Ophelia's line, spoken to her father in the third scene of Act I, and it refers specifically and with homely pathos to the question of young Hamlet's intentions toward her; but it would serve very well as a motto for the whole play. "I do not know, my lord, what I should think."

The world of the play is one in which all things seem in flux and nothing can be trusted. It is a play of doubt and disillusionment, in the light of which the simplest statements, like that of Ophelia above, take on a double meaning. The first line of the play is the guard's conventional challenge, "Who's there?", to be repeated in a few seconds: "Stand! Who's there?" In both instances the answers are reassuring, but the sentinels voice the challenge with the Ghost in mind, and "who" the Ghost is is one of the important questions for both Hamlet and us. Is it an "honest ghost," or is it really the devil, who "hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape" (like Claudius, who can "smile, and smile, and be a villain")? What lies behind the mask? Is there anyone who does not wear one?

Hamlet's mother is not what he has thought her to be. What then of Ophelia? "We are arrant knaves all. . . Go thy ways to a nunnery." Old friends like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not exempt and must be pressed for their motives--the suspicious questions come pellmell: "Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining, Is it a free visitation? Come, deal justly with me. Come, come! Nay, speak." The physical world offers no comfort. For Hamlet Denmark is "one o' the worst of dungeons," for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is not; and Hamlet at this point is willing to say that "truth" is only bias, that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

Perceiving this emphasis, C. S. Lewis, remarking that "The characters are all watching one another, listening, contriving, full of anxiety," concludes that "The world of Hamlet is a world where one has lost one's way."

Hamlet speaks to us.

III. Problems

We proceed with a preliminary identification of some of the problems in this most problematical play. They can be defined as problems of character. Keep the number of them small: the Ghost, Claudius, Hamlet.

In all such discussions remember that literary problems for the most part can have only tentative solutions. A poem or play is read from different points of view in different historical periods, so that our Hamlet is sure to be somewhat different from Coleridge's. It is equally true that a poem or play is read from different points of view in the same historical period, so that Professor Stoll's Hamlet is sure to be somewhat different from Professor Kittredge's, and the Hamlet you will encounter in these pages is sure to be somewhat different from yours. Somewhat. For if we are all conscientiously scrutinizing the same text, all our Hamlets should be recognizably of the same family.

A. The Ghost

What is to be made of him, what did Shakespeare intend us to make of him?

The behavior of Claudius when confronted with "The Murder of Gonzago" seems to prove that it was an honest ghost--"I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pounds!" Hamlet cries then to Horatio, and thereafter does not seem to doubt the ghost's truth, and audiences generally do not. But, unlike the bloody shade of Banquo, this is a most voluble ghost and he speaks with the voice of mortal man (in the original production he was played by an actor named William Shakespeare), his words characterizing himself, inviting us to judge him as a man: character in a play. What do we find?

Simply as a man he must put us ordinary mortals off. His provocation is of course considerable, he has been rather badly used. To put it so is flippant, but the convention of the revenge ghost no longer has power to persuade us, and the human accents of this ghost's discourse make it hard for us to believe that we are listening to a man reporting his own "foul and most unnatural murder." What we seem to be given most insistently is the furious cuckold, the man outraged by his wife's betrayal, the outrage intensified by the victim's conviction of his own moral superiority. "O Hamlet," he laments,

> "what a falling-off was there,
> From me. . . . . to decline
> Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of mine!"

To continue a moment later,

> "So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,
> Will sate itself in a celestial bed
> And prey on garbage."

Well, we ordinary mortals find ourselves uncomfortable in the presence of radiant angels; and, were it not clear from the play's whole text that a certain nobility is an essential element in the conception of the elder Hamlet, the modern reader might feel compelled to take the Ghost simply as a dramatic projection of the son's idealization of him. But surely we are intended to see the nobility as flawed.

The role had its origin in the Elizabethan revenge-tragedy tradition and the elder Hamlet conforms to the tradition in issuing the revenge command to his son; after his first "Mark me" he gets to it in short order, and all his rhetoric is calculated to plant the revenge passion in young Hamlet's consciousness. But something goes wrong. Weeks go by with nothing done, casting a retrospective irony upon the son's promise to "sweep" to his revenge "with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love."

Still, if he cannot obey it, Hamlet must at least live with his father's "dread command"; and living with it through the weeks and months of delay is made by the playwright to appear as a process of corruption. There are clear signs of psychic disintegration. The antic disposition is not entirely feigned. A streak of brutality shows itself in Horatio's "sweet prince" again and again: in his treatment of Ophelia; in his moral indifference to his killing of Polonius (I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room"); in his ruthless disposal of those childhood friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are presumably ignorant of the nature of the sealed orders they are carrying to the English monarch. It must appear that it is not so much revenge the Ghost carries with him into the play as, simply, death.[1] Death without meaning. First Polonius; then Ophelia; then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; none of them guilty of any crime, but only of "some error or frailty." Then the concluding holocaust: Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet himself, and his fellow-revenger Laertes. The Ghost's harvest is rich indeed--eight lives for his one. But what actual willing, actual purpose, there is in it all belongs only to Laertes and Claudius. The rest of it seems to suggest some dreadful senselessness at the heart of things: the innocent and guilty are brought down together, indiscriminately. We must surely agree with Horatio's summary at the end: what we have been shown is a sequence of "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts," most of them" casual slaughters" brought on by "accidental judgments" and "purposes mistook."

But we cannot leave it here. In most of the Shakespearian plays in which the revenge theme appears, the revenger is gradually corrupted and usually punished in the end by the revenge process itself, regardless of the justice or injustice of the cause. Certainly the elder Hamlet's "cause" is as just as the rhetoric of Shakespeare can make it and the enormity of the crime of Claudius is clear. But the "dread command" itself does not really serve the cause of justice (did Shakespeare intend the Ghost's moral pride as a warning that there is something wrong with his purpose?); what the father's spirit brings with him into the world of the play is not justice, but a "dread" harvest of injustice, first breaking and then destroying his own son in the process. So there is tragic sense in the senselessness of these disasters.

"The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil," Hamlet says, planning the test of the play-within-the-play. G. Wilson Knight observes drily, "It was." This angel may be not so much radiant as fallen, although that may not make him any easier to live with.

B. Claudius

And how will our students take the wicked uncle? Will their judgment of him be as harsh as Hamlet's?

By contrast with his brother, Claudius appears as a full-blooded sensualist, hearty at the banquet table and as middle-aged lover able to cause "mutiny in a matron's bones." The marital relationship between him and his Queen, however, seems one of mutual trust and understanding (she can calmly refer in his presence to "our o'er hasty marriage"), and the one statement Shakespeare allows Claudius about his feeling for her makes it clear that it is based on far more than lust--"She's so conjunctive to my life and soul / That, as the star moves not but in his sphere, / I could not but by her." It is in the Petrarchan idiom and we are clearly intended to take it at face value. It may be unworthy of us to feel that the Queen's fall from the grace of her "radiant angel" is at least understandable, but does not Shakespeare perhaps ask us to be faithful not to our morality but to our mortality?

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[1] This view is emphasized in essays by L. C. Knights and G. Wilson Knight. It is perhaps strange that it needs such emphasis, but readers of the play seem to have been all too willing to see the elder Hamlet exactly as the son sees him.

In the soliloquy of the prayer scene, the playwright also endows this smiling villain with the virtue of self-honesty: he knows his crime has branded him with the mark of Cain, knows that his prayer has failed, since "Words without thoughts never to heaven go." His moral torment is real. He seems to link himself with Macbeth in his vain question about his bloodstained hand--"Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?" But Macbeth's expedient of deliberately hardening his sensibilities by sinking deeper in crime is totally foreign to the nature of Claudius as Shakespeare creates it. Macbeth is a satanic irrationalist and the murder of Banquo is almost as senseless as the murder of the family of Macduff later. By contrast Claudius is rational: the "effects" gained for which he killed, "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen," he would rest content were it not for his secret torture, and a second crime is not contemplated until he knows beyond doubt that his own life is in danger.

Finally, Shakespeare is at pains to show us that Claudius was well-qualified for the crown. The state is in good hands; whatever is rotten in Denmark it is not its political life. The Council of State scene, the second of Act I, shows the King disposing of four problems with consummate skill. It is presumably the first formal meeting with the "Lords Attendant" since the royal marriage, and so that must be the first order of business since the Queen is there enthroned beside him. He makes the necessary reference to the "o'erhastiness" of the marriage with the greatest dignity, balancing antitheses like a juggler ("With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage"), almost making us forget that this marriage had murder for a prologue. Then comes the dispatching of his ambassadors to Norway to counter the threat to Denmark of the young Fortinbras (the three young men, Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras, are of course placed in significant parallel). Then the warm recognition of Laertes, a courtesy that is really a public acknowledgment of Claudius's political debt to his father. And then the problem of Hamlet. The King is as firm with him as he intends to be with the young Fortinbras. To mourn a death even of a father overlong is "peevish opposition" to the fact of our mortality, "to reason most absurd," etc.--the voice we hear now is an adult voice speaking with the authority of wisdom based on experience. But here the case is hopeless: the problem of Hamlet is the only one on the day's agenda which the new King has failed to solve.

"Wretch," the elder Hamlet calls Claudius, and "garbage," and his son: "Bloody, bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain." Do father and son have the whole truth about him?

C. Hamlet

He is perhaps the "roundest" of all of Shakespeare's characters, a complex figure of baffling contradictions, equally puzzled about himself and the world around him, and at the end given no moment of real illumination about himself and the responsibility he has surely shared with Laertes and the King for the "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts" of the play's condluding episodes.[2] Little wonder that there has been a "Hamlet problem." Hamlet himself was the first to recognize it.

Note the opposites yoked together in his character. We have referred to the brutality that shockingly appears at certain moments of stress. This uneasily coexists with the civilized sensibility that in the great speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the second scene of Act II celebrates the wonders of the universe and the glory of the human spirit, although this turns out to be only a prologue to his confession of life-hatred and misanthropy--"Man delights not me." But this scene has begun with the warm greeting to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern--"My excellent good friends. . . Good lads, how do ye both?"--an echo of his earlier greeting to Horatio that follows immediately upon the first and perhaps most bitter of all the soliloquies, the savage castigation of his mother. But now with Horatio here his thoughts seem to be on taverns: "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart." Later, however, on the ramparts with his friend, the Puritan in him shows itself in his attack upon the King's "deep drinking."

He is a scholar of Wittenberg, but we may agree with L. C. Knights' observation that "he does little enough effective thinking about the moral and metaphysical problems that beset him." Yet he has one of the scholar's traits: he lives by words. One of the play's most brilliant strokes is that which has Hamlet in his state of hysteria after the departure of the Ghost writing down in his tablet the discovery that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain": he is a man who tries to make words do his work for him. Yet he is also an athlete, an expert duellist, an accomplishment that will bring about his end.

Although his first long speech in the drama is a sermon on false behavior, on the insincerity of "actions that a man might play," he is himself no mean actor, playing the madman's role convincingly and giving the professional players an impromptu lecture on the art of acting. Torn by grief and subject to fits of black depression, he is also a wit with a feeling for satire and he can talk bawdy as outrageously as Romeo's friend Mercutio. Half-playfully accused by Rosencrantz of ambition he denies it in a splendid figure of speech, but in his last dialogue with Horatio one of the items in his bill of indictment against Claudius is that he "popped in between the election and my hopes." He is, finally, a violent hater and yet stands in obvious need of love and friendship.

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[2] Another view is of course possible. Many critics have found in the dialogue with Horatio in the last scene of the play evidence that Hamlet has finally come to grips with himself and regained his ability to function in the world as it is. It is an important question for classroom consideration. Every reader must decide for himself. Criticism thrives on disagreement.

What are we to make, what is a twelfth-grade class to make, of such a startling bundle of contradictions?

Say first that he secures our belief in large part because he is not unitary, because (as in life) he is capable of a bewildering succession of contradictory moods and impulses. But the wild excess of the contradictions? In him the normal human inconsistencies are exaggerated to the point of breakdown because he has suffered a series of shocks he is not equipped to cope with. They are shocks of discovery, intolerably brutal for anyone, but especially shattering for a young man.[3]

There is first the death of the father, whose natural paternal authority was reinforced by the authority of the monarch and military hero (with "An eye like Mars, to threaten and command," the son says, remembering). As the king's only son he has been the court's darling, "the expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / The observed of all observers." With the father's sudden death and the mother's "o'erhasty marriage," he finds himself alone in a balefully threatening universe, plunged without warning from what must have seemed absolute security into a humiliating dependence upon a mother and stepfather whom--given his nature--he can only regard with moral loathing. The violence of his feeling about the mother especially is a measure of the profundity of his sense of loss and alienation, which extends from the world of his Denmark to the whole universe. From a condition of absolute trust (it has been called "idealism"), Hamlet has swung to the opposite extreme: now all is tainted, except the dead father and the one true friend, Horatio.

Then comes, before there has been time for some sort of recovery from the first two shocks, the dreadful knowledge that the uncle has been guilty of fratricide and that the mother was sexually unfaithful before the father's death. All this is coupled with the "dread command" to the act of revenge, when, ironically, the very reasons that seem to justify the revenge impulse have worked in the revenger himself in such a way as to make him incapable of any decisive act of will, since decisions seem to require a unitary, an undivided, psyche. Contrast Laertes, who is made of coarser stuff. The revenge the

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[3] Although the playwright is at such pains in the last act to establish Hamlet's age as thirty, the psychological evidence for most readers seems to discredit the full maturity that thirty suggest.

Ghost has demanded of Hamlet actually issues in life-hatred and a self-loathing which may be felt as a revenge of Hamlet on himself, a revenge for the crime of having trusted so innocently in the fair appearance of the things of this world. "I could accuse me," he says bitterly to Ophelia,

> of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven?"

A word more, then, about the Ghost. It is not so much the "dread command" as it is the knowledge he brings with him into the play that has such a destructive effect upon the son. But part of this knowledge the son had before the Ghost's appearance, so that the supernatural visitation has the function not so much of motivation (the Ghost is in a kind of parallel with Macbeth's witches) as of symbol. The first soliloquy makes it perfectly clear that the destructive process has begun before the rendezvous on the ramparts: the Ghost's message is the knowledge of evil and is hardly more than a confirmation of what Hamlet has already told himself.

IV. Structure

Let us now see what an examination of the play's structure may do to improve our understanding of the work as a whole.

As we have come to expect of Shakespeare, the act divisions obscure instead of clarifying the play's actual organization. It is apparent that there are not five but three phases, or "movements," in the action. These phases are separated by substantial lapses of time, and at the end of each a motive is laid down for the new narrative direction to be taken in the succeeding phase.

Phase I

Only the first phase coincides with an act division: Act I covers the twenty-four-hour sweep of events from Horatio's confrontation of the Ghost on one night to Hamlet's a night later. The main function of this phase is to give Hamlet the total knowledge that is the mainspring of the dramatic action. Only the Laertes-Ophelia-Polonius scene deflects the attention away from the Ghost-Hamlet-Claudius-Gertrude cluster. It is necessary of course because Laertes must be got out of the way until he is needed for the counter-revenge movement in the last phase; but, more importantly, this scene has thematic relevance since it establishes the submissiveness of Ophelia to her father (contrast Juliet and Desdemona), which appears to Hamlet as another example of betrayal. Generally it is a brilliantly planned act, the daylight brightness and clarity of the court scene framed in the midnight obscurity of the ghost scenes.

Phase II

Between the end of Act I and the beginning of the second phase a time lapse of about two months is established by Ophelia's correction of Hamlet in the play-within-the-play scene: "Nay, 'tis twice two months" since the elder Hamlet's death (in Act I he was "but two months dead").

The continuous action of the second phase extends from the beginning of Act II, in which Ophelia reports to her father the frightening behavior of Hamlet (it was "as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors"), through the successive episodes of the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guilderstern and then of the Players, the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago," the killing of Polonius and the loud passionate dialogue with the queen; and, finally, Hamlet's forced departure for England at the end of Act IV, Scene 4. The main narrative threads are the disillusionment with Ophelia and resultant abuse of her, the testing of the truth of the Ghost's information by the play-within-the-play, resulting most crucially in the visit to the bedchamber at the queen's command and the accidental killing there of Polonius, which prepares for the counter-revenge action of the third phase. Somethings ends in Phase II: any doubt Hamlet may have had of the Ghost. Something new is about to begin: the revenge of Laertes.

The test proves the Ghost "true," although the first opportunity for the fulfillment of the revenge command must be passed by, because to kill the King in prayer would be, Hamlet tells himself, to send him to heaven and hence no revenge. Shakespeare has Claudius himself tell us that this is mistaken, since there can be no absolution and salvation without true repentance and Claudius is too honest to lie to himself and the Almighty about that. Was this somewhat strange episode intended to mean that the successful testing of the Ghost's truth has changed nothing and that Hamlet here has simply "rationalized" another delay?

But he has already been summoned by Polonius to his mother's chamber, where his violent behavior at the start of the dialogue prompts Gertrude's cry for help, which results in the unhesitating killing of the eavesdropper. The ensuing loud attack upon the mother's sin, then, is made in the presence of the corpse of Ophelia's father. In the passion of his "virtue" Hamlet is indifferent to his own bloody deed, which has bereaved his former love as well as his friend Laertes.

Phase III

The chief dramatic purpose of this death, however, is to set in motion the counter-action which is the play's third and last phase, beginning with Act IV, Scene 5. The time interval between phases here must be a matter of several weeks--whatever is necessary for the aborted voyage to England and the return to Denmark.

It begins with the madness of Ophelia, who

"speaks much of her father; says she hears
There's tricks in the world, and hems, and beats her heart."

So another aspect of the play's design begins to appear. The second death of a father parallels the first, resulting in a madness that is never feigned and making of the son and brother a second revenger (Shakespeare has Hamlet make it explicit: "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his"). Upon his return from Paris Laertes without any deliberation rouses the populace in his cause, and then, manipulated by Claudius, without any hesitation accepts his scheme for the murder of Hamlet.

Preparing him for it, Claudius equates the revenge spirit with love, of which Time may qualify "the spark and fire"; therefore,

"That we would do,
We should do when we would; but this 'would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents."

This is another statement of the theme of constant flux that runs throughout the play, threatening all stability. It is stated most fully in the Player King's speech to his Queen, in the lines ending,

"This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change. . ."

Thus it must seem to Hamlet, who has seen as he thinks the "changing" of the love of both Gertrude and Ophelia, and who believes that he himself in his delay has been unfaithful to his love for his father. But does not the play as a whole expose the fallacy of the revenge code in making the unholy alliance between love and murder? Consider in this connection how Shakespeare handles Laertes.

It surely must be recognized that the passionate resolution of Laertes was not intended to serve as a favorable contrast to Hamlet's doubt and hesitation. The ugly trickery of the foils is a most villainous example of the evil concealment which has inspired the indictment Hamlet and the play itself draw up against the world. In the original revenge tragedies any stratagem may have seemed justified; but Shakespeare's play must be thought of as a dramatic critique of the old conventions in the interest of a higher moral vision than the "eye-for-an-eye" doctrine of revenge. Hamlet's delay is of course made to seem a "blunting" of a sacred purpose, a breaking of an almost holy pact with the perturbed spirit of a loved and noble father; but this view coexists with and is partly contradicted by the fact that the delay has been in the interest of a proper concern for the truth of the Ghost's accusation and the justice, then, of the cause. We must also be uneasily a aware that when Hamlet does act with spontaneous passion the results are the killing of Polonius, the madness and death of Ophelia, and the chain of events of the new revenge story that ends in the corpse-strewn stage at the end. Is the delay right or wrong? We can only say that so long as Hamlet only *talks*, sensibilities may be bruised but nobody gets killed. Is *he* right or wrong? There is much in him that is admirable, but he grows more and more dangerous as the play moves along. He is caught in the action of a tragic drama, which operates according to the principle of the Player King:

> "But, orderly to end where I begun,
> Our wills and fates do so contrary run
> That our devices still are overthrown;
> Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own."

There *is* a dreadful flux at the heart of things. Love will not hold constant. And perhaps the most terrible way of its not holding constant is when it prompts the spirit of revenge and so issues in love's opposites, hatred, deceit, destruction.

This is the main tragic line provided by the Laertes parallel of the drama's third phase.

V. Resolution

But this is *only* the "main tragic line" of the play's third phase, an abstract and superficial statement of the revenge theme. It ignores most of the real human matter of the play's conclusion, the agonized humanity that appears in one way or another in all the chief characters, but of course is exposed most nakedly in Hamlet the Son. Does he change? In our first consideration of him we said that at the end he is given no moment of real illumination about himself and his moral situation in the play's scheme of things. Should this statement be qualified? Remembering C. S. Lewis's observation that "the world of *Hamlet* is a world where one has lost one's way," it may be asked whether, before the end, Hamlet himself in any way finds his? Is he given any kind of tragic "discovery"?

When we spoke of "problems" at the start of this, we were thinking largely of problems we as readers have in trying to understand the major characters and, through them, the play. Now we may approach t the question of the play's resolution in terms of Hamlet's problems, the ones *he* must try to solve. One may be thought of as personal, issuing from his profound disillusionment with his mother: the problem of the mother-son relationship in the framework of the situation at the beginning of the drama. The second is the revenge problem itself, which in the play's time-scheme presents itself *after* the problem of the mother relationship, with which of course it is closely related. Connected with both of these problems is something that may as well be called the philosophical problem. The mother's defection and the Ghost's dread command both raise questions in young Hamlet's mind about the real nature of the universe and society and how the individual--but of course especially Hamlet--is to relate himself to them. It should be emphasized here that we do not read the play in order to draw abstract philosophical conclusions from it. The philosophical problems are there simply as aspects of Hamlet's whole problem of living--and of dying too. They are philosophical problems *dramatically* conceived and presented.

The fourth scene of Act III is one of the most important in the play, not only because it begins with the killing of Polonius and thus sets in motion the whole counter-action of the last phase, but also because it is the first and only time in the drama that Shakespeare brings mother and son together for a private confrontation. It begins with murder, continues immediately with the savage moral attack upon the Queen, an attack interrupted by the last visitation of the Ghost, which seems to bring the loud agitation of the first half of the scene to an end. Thereafter there is a clear movement toward reconciliation of the son with the mother. At the start Hamlet "would it were not so" that Gertrude is his mother, as brutal a thought as a son can utter. At the end she is "good lady," and, once more at last in an intimate relationship with her, he seems reluctant to leave--five times he says "good night" before his actual departure (taking poor Polonius with him).

The moral denunciation is divided between Gertrude's defection, her "falling off," in descending from the Hyperion-Jove-Mars that was the first husband to the "mildewed ear," the "moor," that is the second--divided between that theme and the attack upon middle-aged lust, in the course of which Shakespeare puts into Hamlet's mouth a language of sexual disgust that is vibrant with the moral shock that is the central fact in the psychology of Hamlet as he is in the play. We feel that this long harangue is almost involuntary, a convulsion brought on by the profound need *to relieve himself* of the poison he has carried within him for so long.

There is probably no reason to doubt the sincerity of Gertrude's shame and repentance. Shakespeare does not in the rest of the play give much real emphasis to her private story, but he does allow her one aside in the first Ophelia mad scene that indicates he intended us to believe that the repentance was not a thing of the moment--"To my *sick* soul," she moans, "as sin's true nature is, / Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss." As for Hamlet, the obsession that is also a sickness and that shows itself so bitterly in the first soliloquy does not appear again after this scene. Furthermore, his first words after Laertes has given him the death wound are, "How does the Queen?", and when he *knows* he is dying his first farewell is to her: "Wretched queen, adieu." "Wretched" here of course means unhappy, suffering, a compassionate recognition of her "sickness" of soul.

One of the most insistent themes of the play has found its dramatic resolution. Even if he had lived, this Hamlet could never have recovered his old innocent worship (presumably) of the mother, but his unhappy knowledge surely would have been tempered with compassion. This is one kind of "finding one's way."

Is there evidence that, given this liberation from part of his burden, Hamlet is now able to come to grips with the "dread command" and to act decisively with regard to it in one way or another? The seventh and last soliloquy may offer a clue, but, before we turn to it, a word or two about the general function and effect of the soliloquies in Hamlet.

Perhaps in no other Shakespearian play is one made to feel in such constant and intimate touch with the private subjective life of the protagonist, the whole complex blend of feeling and thought in him that is human consciousness. For this the seven soliloquies are partly responsible, recurring as they do at pretty regular intervals throughout the first two phases of the play. In method they tend to be dramatic in a way that most of the soliloquies in the earlier plays are not. That is, in them movement and syntax are determined by what one critic has called the "current of feeling" at the particular moment in the dramatic action and not by reason or logic. Again and again the thought must struggle against the passion of the moment, the thought deflected, the sentences themselves interrupted, from within, as in this passage from the first soliloquy:

"--and yet, within a month--
Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman--
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears--why she, even she
(O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourned longer) married with my uncle. . ."

This is a spontaneous expression of the mental life of the speaker at the given moment. It is a technique that may be adapted to the hysterical wildness of the soliloquy that follows the departure of the Ghost or to the rant and bombast of the one following the Hecuba recitation of the Player. Most of them are direct reflections of abnormal mental states, and as such contain a paradox. What Hamlet says in them is not to be trusted, and yet since they are private we know they are valid in a way that many of the speeches in the dialogues are not. In the soliloquies the hero is not acting and he reveals truths about himself that he himself does not understand.

The seventh soliloquy, which brings the last scene of the second phase to an end (Act IV, Scene 4), is prompted by the Captain's curtly realistic explanation of the true nature of the campaign of Fortinbras against Poland, although its real subject is the old problem of the revenge delay. This relates it thematically to the third soliloquy (Act II, Scene 2)--"What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" But they are significantly different in that young Fortinbras, a kind of Hotspur, is a better "example" than the Player to "exhort" Hamlet, to spur his dull revenge; significantly different also in that the earlier soliloquy is much noisier, much less controlled--

"Am I a coward?
Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat
As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
Ha, 'swounds, I should take it. . . .
. . . Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless,, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!"

This is one of the characteristic styles of the Hamlet of the first two phases, but there is nothing like it in this soliloquy that ends the second phase. Even the concluding "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" seems really deadly simply because the language that leads to it is generally cool and "reasonable" and because it itself is succinct. And the mental state the soliloquy as a whole relects, in that it allows the speaker to move step-by-step to a definite end, seems "normal" and therefore effective in a way that even the "To be or not to be" speech is not.

The thought of the speech centers upon the concept of honor, the only prop beyond the eye-for-an-eye justification that the medieval revenge concept had. The Shakespearian attitude toward honor as it may be deduced from the plays is complex and need not be dwelt upon at length here. In this scene, however, it is clear that Hamlet thinks that the motive of the Fortinbras campaign is not admirable and does not represent his own conception of honor. Fortinbras is "with divine ambition puffed," "great argument" is lacking in the adventure, which must be a kind of disease ("imposthume") caused by "much wealth and peace." His followers go to their deaths "for a fantasy and a trick of fame." These are judgments delivered by the practical reason, by common sense, which judges decisions and actions in terms of the result aimed at and the probable success of the venture. It is the pragmatic approach,, and Hamlet here is sensible enough to recognize its value.

But the "god-like reason" invoked near the beginning of the speech also recognizes "honor" as a justification for some actions that may have no practical justification--"When honor's at the stake" there is true greatness in finding quarrel in a straw. This concept of honor is feudal, or medieval, and was an almost central principle in the chivalric code. It is linked naturally to the concept of revenge. In its finest manifestations it meant selfless devotion to an ideal integrity, transcendent of material consideration. Pragmatism by contrast is "modern." Perhaps Shakespeare's most famous treatment of the issue is found in Henry IV, Part I: Falstaff and Hotspur represent the extremes of, respectively, a commonsense rejection of honor ("Who hath honor? He that died a Wednesday.") and a silly use of the honor concept to justify any recklessness of behavior. Prince Hal in that series of plays is probably meant to stand for ideal honor.

Hamlet's cause of honor, however, is no straw as he tells himself. He has motives both of "reason" and of "blood" to spur him on to his revenge--"a father killed, a mother stained." So, quite soberly as it seems, with no sign of the earlier hysteria, he arrives at his murderous conclusion. What follows?

In the Hamlet narrative, when it is resumed, his alteration of the sealed orders which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are carrying, ignorant of their content, to England; his return to Denmark; his dialogue on death at the graveside; his attack on Laertes in the grave of Ophelia; and then at the start of the last scene of the play his account to Horatio of what happened at sea. This passage brings us to the "philosophical problem." Let us consider it, and then return to the question of Hamlet's new "resoluteness."

The relevant speeches are two in number, the first appearing near the beginning of the second scene of Act V. In it, Hamlet, about to tell Horatio of his ruse in disposing of the English commission (and incidentally of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), makes a philosophical defense of "rashness" or "indiscretion." Having acted impulsively and swiftly on a night when "in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep," the success of the venture shows that

> "Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will."

The speech is more elusive than it may at first appear to be. For instance, how are we to take "divinity" in this context? Is it the same "divinity" that Claudius says "doth hedge [protect] a king" when he is threatened by Laertes? Surely not, since Claudius' "divinity" and Hamlet's are directly opposed to each other (although of course in any war God usually fights on both sides). Is it a spiritual, or at least supernatural, force at work in this world of time and space, and at work for its own obscure ends regardless of individual human wills? If so, it is a force that seems to have less in common with the Christian's Will of God (in which we find our peace) than with the concept of an inexorable, enigmatic, and perhaps whimsical Destiny, "sometime" serving us well, sometime not. Furthermore, the "rashness" which is supposed to work in its service would seem in this play to find its perfect symbolic expression in the killing of Polonius through the arras (tapestry), which makes the identity of the victim unknowable. "What hast thou done," the Queen cries, and Hamlet: "Nay, I know not. Is it the King?" And Gertrude: "O, what a rash and bloody deed is this," thus linking the "bloody thoughts" at the end of the Fortinbras soliloquy with the "rashness" philosophically celebrated for the benefit of Horatio, always Hamlet's most dependable audience. So what does this speech in the last act really mean? Act without thinking and trust to luck--which sounds better if it is called "divinity." It is the most dangerous kind of resoluteness; it is usually called recklessness.

The second "philosophical" speech of this scene comes just before the entrance of the court in preparation for the contest with Laertes, and serves dramatically as Hamlet's explanation of his refusal to obey his premonition of ill.

> 'Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be."

In this speech the shaping divinity is replaced by "special providence," and, partly perhaps because of the different language that supplies the context of the earlier speech, the effect of this substitution is to suggest that Hamlet has turned now to the comfort the Christian finds in his faith that there is a Divine scheme of things that takes account even of the sparrow, even though it may be hidden from the human reason. Perhaps Hamlet is at last moving toward some final reconciliation with the way things are. He feels "ready" even for his own death. But this readiness, which is "all," is coupled with a final surrender of the "god-like" reason. "Since no man knows aught of what he leaves," one may as well leave it now as later. "Let be." This may be taken by some readers as "illumination" leading toward reconciliation, by others simply as an expression of spiritual exhaustion after Hamlet's long agony of the soul. All that is certain is that the speech is another version of the irreducible inscrutability that so often seems central to the Shakespearian tragic vision, always defiant of man's longing for certainty. "O," cries Brutus before the last battle,

> "that a man might know
> The end of this day's business ere it come!
> But it sufficeth that the day will end,
> And then the end is known."

So--"Come, ho! Away!" Man must act out his role to the end.

It would seem that the Fortinbras soliloquy promises, both in its substance and in its form, a new rational decisiveness that is not fulfilled in the third phase. This may have been necessary, by virtue of the "law" of the drama, because of the tragic contradiction, in this world of Shakespearian values, between the honor and the revenge concepts: the "reasons" of honor demand revenge; but revenge either corrupts or destroys (or both) the revenger. Is perhaps the real reason for Hamlet's delay his instinctive sense--never articulated--that this is so? Did Shakespeare want us to think this?

But the promise of the Fortinbras soliloquy could not be kept for another reason: such a transformation would have been psychologically invalid. We do not change so radically and swiftly at the prompting of the conscious mind. So Shakespeare proceeds. At the start of the fifth act there is a return of the old morbidity (but in the confrontation with death there at the graveside, does he purge himself of that, by a process similar to that we see working in the dialogue with his mother?). Then there is the violent attack on Laertes in the grave of Ophelia--he is clearly out of control again, and never does he appear in a worse light. The old strain of inhumanity surely shows itself in his quick response to Horatio's "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't": "They are not on my conscience." And in the "philosophical" speeches the very idea of rational self-control seems to have been abandoned. "Let be." So he will duel with Laertes for the King his enemy and win the wager for him if he can. Hamlet may have begun to find the way, but he is not given time enough and the "way" is dimly seen to the end.

The irony of the tragic conclusion is clear. The rashness of Hamlet in killing the unknown eavesdropper behind the arras (whose own rashness had place him there), brings a new and rashly resolute revenger into the tragic lists against the irresolute revenger. The result is that all are destroyed, although the destruction is accompanied by a final reconciliation that is perhaps the most moving moment in the play: the exchange of forgiveness by the dying young men.

The only triumph is of course that of Fortinbras, whose father was killed by the elder Hamlet. For this son, a Fate that has worked through rashness and indiscretion has been a most effective Revenger, wiping out all members of the royal house of Denmark, thus making way for the younger Fortinbras to claim his "rights of memory in this kingdom." But of course the elder Fortinbras was killed not treacherously but "honorably," and revenge has never been on his son's mind.

The soldier's funeral Fortinbras orders for Hamlet is one that would have been suitable for Henry V. Has Shakespeare shown us that it is appropriate for Hamlet, or may he have simply been suggesting that this young fire-eater can think only in military terms? The question probably should not be raised. It is probably only a conventional concluding flourish.

VI. The "Rhetoric" of Tragedy: Values

We may return, in conclusion, to some of the ultimate questions raised in the Prefatory section. For instance, what work of "persuasion" is the rhetoric of tragedy made to do, what are the terms of its "arguments," what is the nature of its "truth," what if anything do we learn from it, etc.?

The questions are especially difficult when applied to Hamlet because the protagonist himself is such a puzzle, with the result that the play itself is something of a puzzle. A contrast with Macbeth will in this connection be useful to our students. There is a split in Macbeth of which we are made aware early in the first act, but the split, the inner conflict, is defined by Macbeth himself with complete clarity, there is no real muddle of understanding in him and no muddle of values in the world of the play seen in its entirety. Macbeth is wrong, totally and absolutely, even though in the first part of the play the eloquent expression of his conflict and his suffering has the power to draw us to him in a kind of fascinated sympathy, the tragic pity. And as the play moves forward we find that our concern is divided and then actually shifts from Macbeth to Malcolm and Macduff and their cause, the cause of wounded Scotland. Now Hamlet may often put us off, but there is never any such shift in our concern with and for him, while at the same time we may be feeling, *he is really impossible, he is a brute, he is a prig, how much easier would Claudius be to live with*, etc., etc. This may puzzle us, make us hesitate in drawing conclusions, in a way that we never hesitate in drawing conclusions about *Macbeth*.

But conclusions about what? In the case of *Macbeth* our unhesitating conclusions are moral: Macbeth is profoundly evil and Malcolm clearly is intended to stand for the forces of good. About Hamlet (and perhaps even about Claudius) we can only say, he is good-and-evil. Ah-ha, then *there is his truth*: he is true to nature, to what we know of human nature, which has always been just such an illogical mixture.

Now how do we know this about human nature? Why, we say, from our experience. Experience, the experience of maturity, is necessary then to arrive at conclusions about the truth of Hamlet? Certainly. Our twelfth-graders, then? Ah yes, this is a problem, this has always been *the* problem. Experience at almost any grade level is limited; and it is probably easier to "teach" subject, form, and point-of-view than it is to "teach" experience. Indeed, it is quite possible that even twelfth-graders are not really ready for--

But before despairing we may remind ourselves that an important past of our "experience" of "life" is reading itself; and that it may be that, exactly to the extent that a great play or novel puzzles or even shocks us, it advances us in obscure and subtle ways on our way to maturity. Through the vicarious experience of reading we grow at once into the work and into life. What if we do not fully understand. Even bewilderment is a useful experience. And after all we as teachers are there to help.

So, how may we work our way into the truth of *Hamlet*?

Our students surely will have some knowledge to help them. For instance, knowing what it is to depend upon a father for security and strength, perhaps also knowing what it is to be prompted by the father-ideal to emulation, they can push on from there to imagine how the father-relationship is intensified and complicated when the father is both king and warrior (president of the firm), with "an eye like Mars, to threaten and command." They will or can quickly be led to see how "true" Hamlet's response to his father's death really is. The Ghost's command (unworthy of an ideal father?), "Remember me," is hardly necessary; the son will be all too prone to let that commandment live "all alone. . . within the book and volume" of the brain. Even a natural death would be felt as a brutal act of a malignant universe, calling for revenge upon something; perhaps upon the mother, who is guilty of surviving. And surely they can be brought to see how a kind of self-indulgence might cause a young darling of a royal court to hug his grief to himself, be unwilling to abandon the very "show" of it in the "customary suits of solemn black": it is a way of trying vainly to hold on to what is gone forever. Surely they can also see that this fruit of filial love, although natural, has a kind of poison in it: that too wilfully to prolong grief (Claudius is right) is to encourage a kind of sickness that may be life-destroying.

And the Ghost's revelation of murder and the revenge command? The ancient theme of fratricide and the revenge program are parts of the play's machinery that Shakespeare inherited, and the heavily dramatic sensationalism which they generate can and should be enjoyed for its own sake. There is something primitive and profound about it. There is savagery in the world of this play, the creatures in it are only half civilized. But the revenge command is inseparably linked with the "o'erhasty marriage," suggesting that such a remarriage may be felt by any Hamlet, no matter how "civilized," as a kind of second killing of the revered father, which might, with no help from a ghost ("O, my prophetic soul!"), inspire the revenge feeling, even though in an ordinary mortal it might never be executed. --So we may proceed, building on whatever knowledge we find in the young heads before us, trying to distinguish as we go between "literal" and "imaginative" truth, belief in what appears and belief in what is meant.

What does literature do to us? In his speech to the Players, Hamlet in dwelling upon the purpose of playing says first that it is to hold the mirror up to nature, to imitate men truly, and this we have been talking about. He goes on to argue a moral purpose for it, in showing "virtue her own feature" [for emulation] and "scorn her own image" [for reform]. This is consistent with Hamlet's own special purpose in ordering the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago": he has heard

> "That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
> Have by the very cunning of the scene
> Been struck so to the soul that presently
> They have proclaimed their malefactions. . ."

Presumably leading to reform. But how does Shakespeare handle it? Claudius is betrayed into an involuntary revelation of guilt, but the prayer scene makes it clear that he does not, will not, can not, repent. This may be taken as a valid observation, worthy of generalization, on the relation between literature and moral behavior. It is most unlikely that human beings are ever either reformed or corrupted by what they read, what they see on a stage. There may still be, however, a significant relation between the recognitions that are a part of the pleasure of reading and the general quality of life. The real determinants of goodness or badness (or the balance in the mixture of good-and-bad) are undoubtedly planted in the human creature before he is capable of reading intelligently, and when he comes to literature it is not likely to change the main bent and drive of his nature. But the shocks of recognition administered by literature surely refine our moral perceptions and give us a kind of knowledge that experience with both its suffering and its joy is shared, that although I am I, I am also in humanity. No man is an island. . .

But the rhetoric of literature is contrived to persuade us of the beauty of a work as well as of its truth; they are hardly separable.

Now Macbeth and Hamlet are especially useful as occasions for discussions of what is meant by the "beauty" of a work. Like most tragedies they both contain matter that is inescapably ugly, the latter especially frequently coarse in expression and almost repulsive in matter. During his mad phase Hamlet turns scarecrow, and there have been productions of the play in which Ophelia in her madness does not turn all "to favour and to prettiness." Wherein lies, then, the beauty of a play like Macbeth or Hamlet?

The recognition of the beauty of a literary work is compounded of many different perceptions operating, in an ideal reading, all at once. We must review them rapidly. There is the beauty of the verse and the prose, the interplay in them between the ordering of verse line and syntax on the one hand and the "natural" speech rhythms that run counter to the ordering on the other. There is the perception of another kind of "rhythm," a rhythm of scene that is usually considered under the heading of a play's structure, as in the night-daylight contrasts in the first act of Hamlet. This is part of our general perception of a play's internal coherence as it is balanced against its stresses: all of the variety of mood and behavior of Hamlet, all of the hero's own incoherence, balanced against the coherence of the play's architecture (considered in the fourth section of this discussion). It is the development of such recognitions as these that reveals what it perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the rhetoric of literature: its loving devotion to form.

In conclusion, our perception of all these matters is sharpened by the experience and knowledge of backgrounds that it is part of the intention of our curriculum to provide. In the eleventh grade this aim was promoted by the emphasis upon modes and genres, a study of what makes for resemblances between certain works, and how the perception of resemblance may sharpen the perception of difference, and so increase our pleasure in a particular work. So it may be useful to end the classroom discussions of Hamlet by giving some consideration to the kind of tragedy it is.

Both Hamlet and Macbeth make troublesome problems for the disciple of Aristotle, for the heroes of both seem to make almost irrelevant the concept of the nobility of the hero and of "some error or frailty" leading to the catastrophe. Macbeth, purely and simply, is a criminal; a magnificent criminal no doubt, but still a criminal. Hamlet is even more baffling. With or without Aristotle, we expect the tragic hero to be driven by a powerful will, a will directed by a purpose that has been intelligibly--if not intelligently--arrived at, whether it is the killing of a Duncan or a Caesar or a Desdemona; and the enormity of the catastrope is intelligibly related to the greatness of the purpose and the power of the tragic will. But Hamlet is a hero without will. Purpose he has, and a mighty one--the killing, again, of a monarch; but no will to implement it. Hence the kind of intelligibility that is clearly present in Macbeth is obscured to say the least, and we are led to feel the full force of Horatio's emphasis on "accidental slaughters" and "purposes mistook" and to find a certain senselessness in the play's development.

We have already considered, however, the Shakespearian proposition that the revenge impulse, even though it may spring from love and may be "justified" by the enormity of the original crime, operates like a mysterious disease in the tragedies, spreading in a kind of contagion through the world of the play, destroying even the innocent. So do the combined revenge purposes of Hamlet and Laertes corrupt and destroy in this play, and the process, viewed in this way, is not senseless, for it follows a tragic law. So this play accomplishes one of the presumed purposes of tragedy, that of making sense out of the catastrophes that befall us, not in the superficial moralist's way of a precise distribution of blame, but in the largest possible vision of the way things are.

In the second place, and finally, _Hamlet_ associates itself with _Romeo and Juliet_ (a play much inferior to it) in being _par excellence_ a tragedy of youth, a domestic tragedy of filial relationships, of trustful innocence shocked into Experience by recognitions of pervasive evil in the world, of the infinite promise that seems always present in youth tragically frustrated by the lamentable ways of the adult world. "Some error or frailty" indeed! _Hamlet_ speaks especially to the young.

And the final "persuasion" of the rhetoric of tragedy? Tragedy does not prompt to action, including the action that is moral reformation. It prompts, simply, to a contemplation of the mystery of the human condition, never to be quite explained away by reason. This is the work tragedy is made to do.

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LITERATURE CURRICULUM VI

Hamlet

Student Version

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STUDENT VERSION

I. Why Read Hamlet?

It is a question that of course you cannot really deal with until after you have read and thought about the play, but a few observations now simply about the play's subject matter may suggest questions for you to remember as you read.

There are many different ways of viewing the subject of a play or novel or poem, and in trying to come to grips with a work of any complexity it is usually a good idea to consider as many of them as possible. What is Hamlet really "about"?

It is about revenge. It is a murder mystery.

It is about family relationships--of son to father, son to mother, mother to father. It is about a young man's disillusionment. Indeed, it can be thought of as a play about youth.

It is about alienation--a man's sense of estrangement from the world, his sense of aloneness. At the same time it is about friendship and love.

It is a drama about doubt. It is about a young man's struggle to understand himself and the world around him, giving special significance to the first two lines of the play: "Who's there?" "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself." Who is anyone really, to be "unfolded" to another?

It is a play about a hopeless bungler. It is a play about indefinite postponement, about a man's long delay in meeting a heavy and solemn obligation. Obligation to a ghost.

And, since it begins with the appearance of that ghost, the ghost of a dead father, and ends with the violent deaths of the hero, his former friend, and his mother and stepfather, it is a play about death.

Revenge, murder, family relationships, disillusionment, alienation, love, and friendship, doubt, attempts at self-understanding, procrastination, death--except for revenge and murder, all of these subjects are matters with which we ordinary people are still concerned (and the daily paper makes it clear that murder is still with us, and who among us has not at some time burned with the desire to "get even"?). They make good reasons, then, for reading Hamlet. Two of them may in your thinking and discussions be given some special emphasis.

The play's emphasis on doubt and alienation, upon the problem of living in a world in which nothing is certain and appearances seem always deceiving, has made this Elizabethan play seem very modern, since our own times have often been described as an "age of anxiety" in which man no longer feels comfortably at home.

The youth of the hero, in the second place, has given young people a special interest in Hamlet. It is true that Shakespeare in the last act has the gravedigger in effect tell us that Hamlet is thirty, but most readers find this hard to believe, perhaps because Hamlet's stunned disillusionment seems more typical of someone eighteen or twenty years old rather than thirty. It is too bad, but probably most people by the time they are thirty have grown hardened in their experience with the ways of the world.

But you will have your own answers to questions about why you find the play interesting after you have read it. If you do not find it interesting, you should of course try to find reasons for that, too. Interest after all is not something that can be commanded.

However, the important thing now is to make a start on it.

II. Structure

As you read Hamlet, think about the ways in which it may resemble and the ways in which it may differ from the Shakespearian plays you have already studied, Julius Caesar and Macbeth. Differences are probably easier to spot than resemblances (which often lie beneath the surface), and it can be said now that those plays have much simpler structures than does Hamlet--a reader tackling them for the first time is less likely to lose his bearings. For this reason an introduction to the structure of Hamlet at this point may be of help to you as you read. Use it as you would a map, returning to it from time to time to locate the point you have reached in your journey.

As you have probably discovered in studying Shakespeare earlier, the five-act division of his plays often seems artificial: for instance, an act division sometimes falls in the middle of an action that is obviously intended to be continuous. Real structural divisions are usually marked by lapses of time. Furthermore, at the end of a real part or phase of a play's narrative movement we usually have the sense of something having come to an end; but this "ending" is usually coupled with the beginning of something else.

Hamlet has three such phases.

PHASE I

Only Phase I coincides with an act division: Act I (of five scenes) is also Phase I.

In it we meet all the main characters:

Hamlet's friend Horatio, very recently arrived from the university which he and Hamlet have been attending, and of course the hero himself;

his mother the Queen and his uncle and new stepfather, Claudius King of Denmark;

Laertes and his father, the elder statesman Polonius (an interesting mixture of political shrewdness and foolishness), and their sister and daughter Ophelia, who loves Hamlet;

and the Ghost of the elder Hamlet, whom his brother Claudius has succeeded to the throne.

In Phase I, we learn that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark"; that Prince Fortinbras of Norway, whose father the elder Hamlet killed in single combat, represents a military threat to Denmark; that Laertes, home on a visit (perhaps for the coronation of Claudius), will return to Paris (we shall not see him again until Phase III); that Hamlet is intensely preoccupied with his father's death and his mother's remarriage; and that Ophelia's brother and father are suspicious of Hamlet's intentions toward her. These matters are all seeds of the plot and need to be carefully considered. This phase and act end with two scenes of continuous action in which the Ghost tells Hamlet of his own "foul and most unnatural murder," and commands his son to take revenge on the murderer.

Something has come to an end: Hamlet's ignorance about the real cause of his father's death.

Something new must now begin: the revenge campaign.

But does it?

PHASE II

This is the longest of the three phases. It extends from the beginning of Act II to the end of Act IV, Scene IV, in which Hamlet is sent under escort to England. About two months elapse between Phase I and Phase II. As in the other two phases, the action of Phase II is continuous and swift.

What does Phase II give us?

The procrastination has begun, Why has Hamlet not acted?

He has, however, begun to play the role of madman, as in confidence he warned Marcellus and Horatio he would do at the very end of Phase I. It is presumably a ruse designed to prove himself too disorganized to be dangerous. The rupture between Ophelia and Hamlet has begun and Polonius diagnoses Hamlet's illness as love-madness.

The Ophelia-Hamlet story is one of the dominant motifs of Phase II. Laertes and Polonius have suspected Hamlet's intentions toward Ophelia; now Hamlet has become profoundly suspicious of her as one of the enemies who surround him. Ophelia is hurt and bewildered.

Hamlet's old schoolfellows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at the Danish court at the invitation of the King. Hamlet soon becomes suspicious of them. They will be the official escorts of his forced departure for England at the end of this phase.

We are given more news of Fortinbras.

The Players arrive. For the third time in the play Hamlet greets old friends. We are now given a reason for the revenge delay: the Ghost may have been an evil spirit in disguise aiming at Hamlet's damnation (this was one view of ghosts current in the age of Shakespeare). Therefore Hamlet will test both Claudius and the Ghost by having the Players stage a play in which the Ghost's story of the first act will be given dramatic form.

The test seems successful--"It is an honest ghost." However, Hamlet rejects his first opportunity to kill Claudius because he is at prayer.

In the fourth scene of Act III, Hamlet obeys his mother's request to visit her in her chamber and at the start of the scene kills Polonius, thinking it is Claudius. The rest of this violent scene is given over to Hamlet's bitter denunciation of his mother, and the rest of Phase II, running through the first four scenes of the fourth act, is taken up with the immediate consequences of the killing of Polonius.

What seems to come to an end at the conclusion of Phase II, is, first, the removal of Hamlet's doubt of the truth of the Ghost's story; and then the end of his bitter obsession with his mother's defection (study the last part of his scene with her carefully). Does an important change take place in him as a result of these two things? Give special attention to the soliloquy ("How all occasions do inform against me") that ends Phase II, the last of his several soliloquies in the play.

The killing of Polonius is the motive for the new action that begins in Phase III: the revenge of Laertes.

PHASE III

Time lapse between II and III: long enough to bring Laertes back from France and Hamlet back from the sea.

Main narrative lines:

The end of the Ophelia story in madness and death, perhaps suicide;

and the conspiracy of Claudius and Laertes against the life of Hamlet.

The two revenge campaigns come to a simultaneous end:

Laertes kills Hamlet;

Hamlet kills Claudius.

A count of the casualties, however, shows that six others have been destroyed, all in one way or another victims of the revenge impulse that dominates the play's action.

III. Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Writing

But the foregoing, as we have said, is only a map to guide us on our way. Reading shows us the terrain, how the people talk and behave, and what the weather is like. "Structure" is abstract. The real play is concrete, rich in detail. Maps are useful, but nobody can tell you much about a place you haven't visited. You must go and see for yourself. That is reading.

However, to stay for a moment longer within our travel metaphor, in order to see intelligently you have to know what to look for, and some help may be needed on that. This is what the following questions are for: to direct your attention to certain things you might otherwise miss.

It will probably be a good idea to keep them by you for frequent reference as you read--but then by this time you've worked out your own tactics in these matters, you're pretty seasoned tourists. We may perhaps be forgiven, however, if we remind you that questions about literature often have no easy or single answers. You proceed by weighing one thing against another, but often the scales do not clearly tip either way. Learn to be content with that.

Finally, only a few questions of the hundreds that might be asked are put down here. Let these few breed questions in your own mind. It is at least as important to learn to frame your own questions as it is to learn to answer someone else's.

PHASE I: I, 1

1. What is the effect of beginning the play with armed sentinels guarding the ramparts of the castle at midnight? What else in the first scene makes the military opening seem appropriate? (You may note in passing that young Fortinbras is introduced in this scene before young Hamlet.)

2. From his speeches before and after the first entrance of the Ghost, what do you deduce about the nature and quality of Horatio's mind?

3. The speech of Horatio in which he tells the story of the single combat between the elder Fortinbras and the elder Hamlet is a good example of the dramatic convention called exposition. Is it skillfully handled? Wouldn't Bernardo and Marcellus know all this? Does the speech bother you? Why or why not?

4. Note again that the play's hero is not referred to until the very end of the first scene. What do you think of this, just as theatrical craftsmanship?

5. If you were directing the play, how would you handle the Ghost, both in this scene and the ones that end this act?

I, 2

6. What are the obvious differences between the tone and atmosphere of Scene 1 and Scene 2? Effect?

7. This is presumably the first formal meeting of King and courtiers (a kind of privy council?) since his marriage with his former sister-in-law. What are the main items on the agenda? Do you think Claudius takes them up in the order of their importance, or is something other than "importance" dictating his procedure? What impression does he make on you?

8. What is the King's attitude toward Polonius? Evidence?

9. Again, a question about theatrical craftsmanship: the black-clad Hamlet is not allowed by the playwright to speak until the King disposes of three other pieces of court business. There he sits, silent, for perhaps six or eight minutes. Good theater? Why or why not? Where would you place Hamlet on the stage in relation to the other characters?

10. What do you think of Hamlet's behavior in his dialogue with the King and Queen? What is the theme of the speech beginning, "Seems, Madam? Nay, it is"?

11. What do you think of the long speech of the King that immediately follows this one of Hamlet? Does his argument about "unmanly grief" make sense?

12. In the Denmark of this play, the monarch was elected, presumably by a King's Council or some such body; the throne was not inherited. Why do you think Claudius takes the political risk of violating this practice by naming young Hamlet his heir? As you move through the play, return to this question from time to time: how well is young Hamlet qualified by mind, training, and temperament, for kingship?

13. What do you make of the King's reference to Hamlet's "gentle and unforced accord"?

When the official meeting of the morning (see the last two lines of Scene 1) is over, Hamlet is left alone on the stage for the first of the seven soliloquies Shakespeare wrote for him in the play's first two phases. The soliloquy was a theatrical convention in Shakespeare's time and it did not fall into disrepute until the development of the realistic

"realistic" drama in the 19th century (Susan Glaspell's "Trifles," a one-act play which some of you will remember, is an example of dramatic realism).

14. Read through this soliloquy at least twice. What seems to determine its organization, logic or emotion or perhaps both? Select a few lines and show how it goes.

15. Of the possible causes of Hamlet's anguish, which seems to receive the main emphasis, his father's death or his mother's remarriage?

16. With what wish does the soliloquy begin? How seriously are we to take it? Keep the second question in mind throughout the reading of the play.

17. "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world." How would you describe the attitude this reflects?

18. There are two sweeping generalizations in the speech. "Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it [the world] merely [entirely]." And: "Frailty, they name is woman." How has Hamlet arrived at these conclusions? How should they be taken?

19. What can you say about the style of the speech? When you read it aloud does it sound like poetry, or like prose? Why?

20. You have now seen Hamlet in the court of the King, revealing himself before an audience, and then alone, speaking without inhibition to himself. Now with the entrance of Horatio you see him in the presence of an old and trusted friend. What is his behavior like in this situation? If you were to write an essay at this point, with no further knowledge, on the character of Hamlet, what would you say about him?

21. What is the effect on you of his

> "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked-meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables."

22. Hamlet's first response to Horatio's account of the Ghost is "'Tis very strange." Then comes his rapid series of questions. What do they imply? Do you think Horatio understands that he is being cross-examined? Does this handling of the Ghost theme suggest that Shakespeare was writing for a highly superstitious audience?

23. How do you interpret these lines?

> "If it assume my noble father's person,
> I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape
> And bid me hold my peace."

What is the significance of "assume"? Of the hell allusion?

I, 3

24. This scene can be discussed in somewhat less detail. Here are a few guiding questions. On the basis of what you have already learned about Hamlet would you say that the warnings of the brother and father are justified? What light do they throw on Laertes? What particular traits in the character of Polonius emerge from the lines Shakespeare wrote for him? Finally and perhaps most importantly, what impression of Ophelia does her behavior create?

I, 4

25. What further do you learn about 16th century attitudes toward ghosts from the first seven lines of Hamlet's first speech to the armed apparition? What is the full significance of Horatio's speech to Hamlet somewhat later, beginning "What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord"?

I, 5

26. "If thou didst ever thy dear father love. . .Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." What do you think of this linking together of filial love and revenge?

27. The revenge command was of course a convention of this kind of tragedy and without it there would be no play. Shakespeare, however, humanizes all theatrical conventions, and so he does this one, by making the ghost's speeches clearly reflect an individual human character. How do you assess the character of the elder Hamlet on the basis of the evidence provided by the long speech beginning with line 42?

28. What do you make of the Ghost's command, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against they mother aught," especially in view of Hamlet's first soliloquy? What is Shakespeare up to here?

29. What is the effect on you of the passage in Hamlet's second soliloquy beginning "Yea, from the table of my memory I'll wipe away all trivial fond records. . ."? Does it give any special significance to the last lines of the Act,

> "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
> That ever I was born to set it right?"

30. How would you describe Hamlet's behavior when he is joined again by Horatio and Marcellus?

31. Why do you think it occurs to him, as it seems so suddenly, that he will adopt the strategy of "putting on" an "antic disposition"? Has he already had, as it were, an "antic disposition" thrust upon him?

PHASE II : II, 1

1. Most readers and audiences find themselves puzzled by the Polonius-Reynaldo dialogue? What do you make of it? Does it tell you anything further about Polonius' character?

2. The question of whether Hamlet's madness is feigned or real continues to plague many readers. In the old revenge tragedies the revenger usually feigned madness as a means of allaying the suspicions of his enemies; and part of the "mad disguise" was the disarray of clothing described here by Ophelia (it is worth noting that this was also a symptom of "love madness"). At this point what do you deduce about Hamlet's reported behavior, especially the "perusal" of her face and the "sigh so piteous and profound"? Does it relate to Ophelia's last speech in this scene?

II, 2

This is the longest scene in the play, beginning with the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and ending with Hamlet's decision to test both King and Ghost with a performance of the play called "The Murder of Gonzago."

3. Do you see anything especially sinister in the King's request of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

4. What do you think of the Queen's quiet statement: "I doubt it is no other but the main, / His father's death and our o'verhasty marriage"?

5. What is the source of the humor that you find in some of the speeches of Polonius?

6. One critic thinks that Hamlet is intended to enter upstage, although unseen by the King, Queen, and Polonius, just before Polonius proposes his eavesdropping plot, and that only by having him do this can we explain his language and behavior in the actual eavesdropping scene (III, 1). Test this proposition when you get there.

7. What do you think of Polonius's aside, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."? What evidence is there that in this scene at least the "madness" is all feigned?

8. What do you make of Hamlet's questioning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his "conjuring" them "by the rights of our fellowship, by the consonancy of our youth," etc., to "be even and direct with me"?

9. What does Hamlet's great speech beginning "I will tell you why" add, if anything, to the opening lines of the first soliloquy ("O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt. . .")?

10. "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw." Is letting the cat out of the bag in the presence of these two a lapse on the part of Hamlet or of Shakespeare or of neither, in your opinion? Why or why not?

11. Do you see any difference between the poetry of the Player's recitation and the poetry that prevails in the play Hamlet? Discuss.

12. What do you think of the "rogue-and-peasant-slave" soliloquy--Hamlet's third? Is the comparison--or contrast--of himself with the Player sensible? What is to be concluded from the "Bloody, bawdy villain" lines followed by the lament that he must "unpack my heart with words"? Further light on Hamlet's mental state?

13. Any comments on Hamlet's decision to set the dramatic trap?

III, 1

14. For the first time in this scene do we hear Claudius in an aside speak his secret thoughts.? The effect of it?

15. The "to-be-or-not-to-be" soliloquy, Hamlet's fourth, is probably the most famous in the play, often printed separately as if it were a self-contained poem, and celebrated for its "philosophy." One may doubt whether, on these grounds, its reputation is deserved. It seems to say something like this: Life is so hard to bear, what with physical pain, social injustice, disappointment in love, etc., that most sensible men would commit suicide if it were not for the fear that the sleep that is death may not be dreamless or that something unknown after death may be worse than the ills we have. Profound, do you think? In any case, what is its dramatic relevance, do you think? That is, what purpose does it serve, coming at this point in the play?

16. Then comes the eavesdropping scene (Shakespeare was very fond of them). What speeches do you think might indicate that Hamlet knows the King and Polonius are listening? Are there any lines that suggest he does not know?

17. In any case, what do you think of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia?

18. Does the scene change your view of Ophelia in any way? What is the effect on you of her rebuke delivered in response to Hamlet's "I never gave you aught"?

19. What is added to our understanding of the "whole" Hamlet by Ophelia's speech immediately following his exit?

20. Do you think that the Kings' conviction that Hamlet is dangerous and must be shipped out of the country is based on any particular speeches or lines of those he has just overheard, or simply upon Hamlet's general behavior?

III, 2

21. Can you explain Hamlet's theory of art as it is expressed in the famous speeches to the players?

22. Hamlet's declaration of friendship and the grounds of his affection for Horatio is perhaps one of the most moving speeches in the play. What are the grounds of his admiration? Is any special significance to be attached to "Give me that man / That is not passion's slave"?

23. There are certain troublesome questions that have been raised about the Dumb Show which fortunately we need not go into. Begin your consideration with the actual spoken dialogue of the Player King and Queen. The most important speech is the Player King's, beginning "I do believe you think what now you speak. . ." Read it very closely. What view of the real nature of the world and of human "purposes" and "passions" is revealed in it? May this view be validly applied to the characters in Hamlet? To all of them or just some of them? What may be going through Ophelia's mind as she listens to them? The Player King is supposed to be re-enacting the marital situation and murder of the elder Hamlet. How does the Player Kings's philosophy square with the outrage felt by the Ghost in the first Act?

24. What is the effect of having two different parties bring the Queen's request to Hamlet?

25. In what way do you think Hamlet's play with Polonius on the shape of "yonder cloud" might be made to apply to one of the central themes of the play Hamlet?

26. How does the short soliloquy (Hamlet's fifth) prepare us for what will happen in the Queen's chamber a little later?

III, 3

27. The King's first soliloquy is the second revelation of his agony of conscience. What lines in it may remind you of Macbeth? Both Claudius and Macbeth are murderers and usurpers. What differences are there in the way in which they are conceived by the playwright?

28. What are the reasons why Claudius may not hope for forgiveness? What is the significance, the meaning, of the last ten or twelve lines on the court of Heaven and repentance?

29. Following immediately upon this agonized speech, how does the soliloquy or aside of Hamlet affect you?

III, 4

30. This scene between Hamlet and the Queen is one of the most important in the play. It is the first and indeed the only time when we

see Hamlet alone with his mother, and we know from the first soliloquy that his mother's remarriage is his most bitter obsession. The most important question to be asked about this scene is, then, what happens in the course of it? Does its mood change, is there a change in Hamlet's mental state before the end? Is there a particular point at which it begins to change? Keep these questions in mind as your read the scene.

31. In view of what is so quickly to happen to him, what is the effect of the opening speech of Polonius?

32. Stage directions are sometimes built in naturally in the dialogue. What line tells you how Hamlet should be acted in the early part of the scene?

33. It is finally proved that Hamlet *is* dangerous. Certainly he has finally acted. But what is the quality of the action? What is the effect of Shakespeare having Hamlet kill Polonius while he is hidden behind a tapestry, and of his question, "Is it the king?" What do you think of his reaction to his discovery that he has killed the wrong man?

34. Twice the Queen refers to the "noisiness," the loudness, of Hamlet's verbal assault upon her. What does this second built-in directive to the actor, together with the language he uses, suggest about his mental state here? Note especially the speeches just before the entrance of the Ghost: in four lines he calls Claudius murderer, villain, slave, "vice of king," and cutpurse. What is the effect of this piling up of epithets?

35. How do you judge the Queen's reaction to her son's denunciation of her?

36. In the first act the Ghost is seen by everyone who is within "seeing distance." Here only Hamlet can see the Ghost, just as in the *Macbeth* banquet scene only Macbeth can see the ghost of Banquo. You may speculate a bit about why Shakespeare chose to do it one way in the first act, another way in this scene.

37. It may even be asked why Shakespeare chose to have the Ghost appear in this scene at all. What do you think? Is there a change in Hamlet after the Ghost's departure?

38. What is the effect on you of the many repetitions of "good night" before Hamlet actually takes his leave?

39. At the end has one of Hamlet's "problems" finally been solved? There may be further evidence, of course, in the rest of the play.

IV. 1, 2, 3.

40. In the light of "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room" and of Hamlet's behavior in the two scenes that follow this one, what do you make of Gertrude's "'a weeps for what is done"?

41. "He's loved of the distracted multitude." This is the first we have heard that Hamlet may have potential political force. One may wonder how it is to be worked into the play's complicated pattern.

IV, 4

42. Fortinbras the fire-eater again. What is his function, do you think, in relation to Hamlet?

43. This short scene ends with Hamlet's seventh and last soliloquy. Although it is actually the most logical of the seven, and the least ambiguous, it is also probably the most difficult because it centers upon the medieval-renaissance concept of honor, which was supposed to make revenge an almost holy obligation. Your teacher will help with this. However, like the soliloquy following the Player's recitation about Priam and Hecuba, the real theme of this one is the delayed revenge. You will find it easy to compare these two soliloquies. How does this one differ in tone from the earlier one? Do you think that this one suggests that Hamlet is now on his way to a condition of greater stability, that in the future we may expect him to be more resolute? Why or why not?

44. Another question, then, one of the most important to be asked about this play: Do you think Shakespeare wants us to condemn Hamlet for failing to sweep to his revenge "with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love"? Did Shakespeare think that the honor concept made revenge an almost holy obligation?

As we move now into the third phase, which might have as a kind of chapter title, "The Revenge of Laertes," this question will become increasingly important.

PHASE III: IV, 5

1. Madness has also been one of the dominant themes of *Hamlet*. Seen against the background of the Renaissance admiration for "god-like reason," a theme which appears more than once in *Hamlet*, madness must seem the worst of all diseases or punishments that man can suffer. Ophelia herself expressed her horror of it, having just seen at least the appearance of it in Hamlet, in these words:

> "And I of ladies most deject and wretched,
> That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
> Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
> Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh. . . (III, 1)

This was spoken of Hamlet, son of a murdered father. Now the fatal discord has stricken Ophelia, daughter of a murdered father. What is the first and most obvious difference between the "madness" of Hamlet and that of Ophelia?

2. In drama, sometimes the shortest and apparently the simplest speeches seem most moving. What is the effect on you of the Queen's "I will not speak with her." If it does move you, why?

3. Note that part of the Gentleman's speech that begins, "Her speech is nothing, / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move / The hearers to collection"--that is, to attempts to make sense of it. We have mentioned that Shakespeare wrote directives for the director and actor into his dialogue. May this be another kind of directive? Addressed perhaps to what "hearers"?

4. What does the Queen's aside (ll. 16-20) suggest to you?

5. What themes, however "jangled, out of time, and harsh," does Shakespeare weave into the two appearance of Ophelia in her madness in this scene? How do they relate to what has happened to her in the course of the play?

6. How does the King behave when threatened with physical violence by Laertes? How are we supposed to take the proposition that "There's such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would"? Where was the hedge of divinity when the elder Hamlet was killed? How are you to take such "universal" propositions in a drama?

7. Ophelia in her distribution of flowers is simply following conventional associations: for instance, pansies were "for thoughts" because the name comes from French pensée, meaning thought; rue was bitter and so might stand for sorrow or repentance--"I rue the day"--etc. To whom do you think she hands the rue?

8. What impression does Laertes make on you in the course of this whole scene? Who at this point comes off better in your estimation, Laertes or Hamlet? Do you find the answer obvious?

IV, 6

Hamlet's letter to Horatio begins a narrative about what has happened to him in his absence that is not completed until the second (and last) scene of Act V. No questions need be raised about this scene.

IV, 7

9. This is the conspiracy scene. (One might note in passing that it is interesting that Hamlet never tries to get Horatio to join him in a revenge campaign.) The King's second speech in the scene, in which he explains why he did not take decisive action against Hamlet himself, deserves some close attention. The first statement has to do with the Queen's attitude toward Hamlet, and the second with the King's feeling for Gertrude. Does the first statement throw any further light on the significance of Hamlet's first soliloquy? What question may the second statement raise about Hamlet's view of the nature of the relationship between his mother and stepfather?

10. What new view of Hamlet and Laertes may be provided by the King's account of the visit of the Norman gentleman to Denmark, his praise of Laertes' swordsmanship, Hamlet's reaction, etc.? Shakespeare is now to make the sport of dueling serve the sinister plot against Hamlet's life. Does this seem appropriate?

11. What is the thematic connection between the speech of Claudius beginning "Not that I think you did not love your father" and the speech of the Player King that we raised questions about earlier? They really say much the same thing, don't they? The contexts, however, are entirely different, and make for a difference in meaning. The intention of the Player King's speech seems purely philosophical. What is the real intention behind Claudius' speech here?

12. If at the end of this scene and act you were to put Hamlet and Laertes in the scales of your judgment, which way would the scales tip?

V. 1

13. Does the dialogue between the two "clowns" at the start further the play's action or add to its meaning? What is its function?

14. What is the dramatic effect of having Hamlet brood so wittily on death at the side of the grave that is being dug for Ophelia? Is this dialogue relevant to the theme of the play?

15. What is the effect on you of the address to the skull of Yorick?

16. What seems to be Hamlet's mood here up to the time of the entrance of the funeral procession?

17. Do you find the grappling with Laertes in the grave of Ophelia shocking or not, justified or not? Has Hamlet behaved like this on previous occasions? Significance?

V. 2

18. Several times in the course of the play characters are given speeches that seem to have "philosophical" import, that seem to be statements of "great truths" quite apart from the play in which they occur. The last half of Hamlet's second speech in this scene seems to be such a statement. But how is it to be taken in the context of the play? What has happened when Hamlet actually has behaved "rashly"? Is the "divinity that shapes our ends the same as the "divinity" that hedges and protects a king, and especially Claudius? Is the praise of rashness a sign of a new resoluteness that seemed to be promised at the end of the soliloquy that ends Phase III? In short, how are we in general to take such speeches, and how are we to take this one in particular?

19. What do you think of Hamlet's response to Horatio's "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't"? Are they simply going to get what is coming to them?

20. How does Shakespeare make it clear that he deliberately put Hamlet and Laertes in parallel?

21. The scene with Osric reminds us that Hamlet has little patience with fools and fops. However, is there any difference between his baiting of Polonius and his treatment of Osric here? If there is, does this represent a change in him?

22. The last exchange between Hamlet and Horatio before the entrance of the court in preparation for the duel ends in another "philosophical statement." Attempt an interpretation. Is there a difference between the "providence" of this speech and the shaping "divinity" of the earlier one? What do you make of "The readiness is all," coming as it does here after nearly five acts of anxiety and agony? What mental state is reflected in "Let be"?

23. In what terms does Hamlet argue his case for being forgiven by Laertes? How do you think we are to take his references here to his madness?

24. The duel itself of course is always brilliantly staged, and we expect the actors playing the two roles to be expert with the foils. It is not until the third "bout" that the trick appears. Up to that point what do you think would be the effect of this contest?

25. The slaughter then begins: the Queen, Laertes, the King, and Hamlet--and before them Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Ophelia. Who is to blame? Do you find any difficulty in the question? Why not simply dispose of it by saying, "Claudius"?

26. What about the play Macbeth? Who is to blame there? Is the answer easier for you? Why?

27. Is the question of "blame" also easier to answer when it is asked of the play Julius Caesar? Why? Note that the revenge theme is present in all three of these tragedies. Which of the two that you have read earlier seems closer in method and effect to Hamlet?

28. Horatio says that when he tells the story of "how these things came about" his audience will hear of "accidental judgments," casual slaughters," and "purposes mistook"? Is this a satisfactory summary of the play's meaning? Would it serve also to "explain" Julius Caesar?

29. What is the final effect on you of the Hamlet-Laertes parallel--does Shakespeare want us to admire Laertes for "sweeping" to his revenge or Hamlet for procrastinating? Is it that simple? In a tragedy like this are we perhaps meant neither to admire nor to condemn, neither to blame nor to exonerate? If so, what are we supposed to feel? Of what does Hamlet "persuade" us?

30. Of the three tragic heroes, Brutus, Macbeth, and Hamlet, what might seem to set Hamlet off from the other two, different as those other two are from each other?

31. In any case, the only "winner" in this play is Fortinbras. What do you think of the final tribute to Hamlet?

IV. "Culmination"

The twelfth year in public school is like the end of a phase in drama: in it something ends, but implicit in the ending is the beginning of something new, whether it be college or a job or something else. The ending is a "culmination," and the culmination, if it is given some consideration as such, ought to be something on which to build, the basis of a continuing and expanding interest.

The study of Hamlet this year may be made the occasion for a consideration of what a culmination of literary study ought to mean, if literature is really to be a continuing interest for you.

Fundamental in all literature is its persistent preoccupation throughout the centuries with human interests, problems, relationships. How does a man relate to his family, his clan, his society or state, to the universe? To what extent can he control these relationships in order to make them as nearly perfect as possible; to what extent must such matters always be beyond his control? You have finished a detailed study of Hamlet. Step back from it now a short distance and look at it from the point of view of such questions as those. Tragedy tends to be pessimistic, and one aspect of its pessimism is the tragic suggestion that the individual intelligence and will are really unavailing against the impersonal forces ("accidental judgments," "purposes mistook"), sometimes called fate, arrayed against them. Is this true of Hamlet? If it is, does it nevertheless somehow prepare one for a more effective handling of human problems than Hamlet was able to manage? Or if nothing more, at least to face the inevitable with some degree of calm, knowing that "the readiness is all"?

Do you feel it more or less "pessimistic: than Macbeth? The Scarlet Letter? Ghosts? In each instance, why or why not?

In a sense these statements and questions grow out of a "utility" view of literature. The notion persists that somehow reading extends our human experience vicariously, and therefore extends or deepens our wisdom. What then about the "enjoyment" of literature, our pleasure in it?

Well, to begin with do you think that "learning" something from a literary work and enjoying it are really separable? There is of course a purely frivolous kind of pleasure that is "profitable" only in that it give us a much-needed relief from the anxieties and tensions of human life, and we are necessarily grateful for this kind of pleasure. The reading and understanding of Hamlet however provide a good example of what the other kind of pleasure may consist in.

In part it comes from a perception of what connections are made in a work, how the work hangs together. At the start of this discussion we said that Hamlet is about revenge, murder, family relationships, disillusionment, alienation, love and friendship, doubt, attempts at self-understanding, procrastination, death--and later we added madness. Looking back on it now, would you say that as these appear in the play they are different subjects, or are they different aspects of the same subject? Is Hamlet's alienation, his sense of being alone in a hostile universe, separable from his peculiar relationships with his dead father, his mother, his stepfather? How does his disillusionment with his mother relate to his treatment of Ophelia? How do all these matters bear upon the intensity of his devotion to Horatio; and how do all of them, again, bear upon the bungling that starts the final chain of catastrophe? And seeing all this, what happens to our question about blame?

Seeing these connections also is what our "knowledge" of the play really is; and our knowledge of the play is part and parcel of our knowledge of "life," and there is a deep satisfaction that is of course pleasure in seeing these things. It is the seeing to which the rhetoric of literature "persuades" us.

And it is of course the playwright who through his art makes these connections for us to see; through his art, which is form, and through the personal point of view, which is his artistic vision, the seemingly unlike things which are love and murder, friendship and alienation, are made into the single, structured tragedy, which is beauty. To see the use of it is to see the beauty, and to see the beauty is to see the use; and this is how we arrive at judgment. It is really as simple and as wonderful as that.

You and your teacher will wish to extend these speculations, making the study of Hamlet a culmination or climax of your long study of literature.